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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000263

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SUBJECT: AL WIFAQ COURTS SUNNIS AND GOVERNMENT BUT RISKS
SHIA IMPATIENCE

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[B](#). MANAMA 0224
[C](#). MANAMA 0096

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq,s strategy since entering the Council of Representatives (COR) in December has been to build trust and consensus with the royal family and Sunni legislators, saving more inflammatory debates over constitutional reform and corruption for later. These efforts have borne some fruit. The ruling family has treated Al Wifaq to a greater degree as a legitimate representative of the Shia community, and the generally government-allied Sunni blocs have signaled their openness to cooperation on some issues. Elements of Al Wifaq,s support base, however, have expressed frustration with the society's perceived quiescent approach. Last year,s election demonstrated mainstream Shia support for Al Wifaq,s entry into the political system, but this will not last forever. The question remains how long Al Wifaq has before its adherents transfer their support from those in the assembly hall to those in the streets. End Summary.

OPPOSITION BUILDING TRUST BEFORE PUSHING MAJOR CHANGES

[1](#)2. (C) Al Wifaq MP Jawad Fairuz told EmbOffs that Al Wifaq has three legislative priorities: to improve Bahraini citizens' standard of living, reduce government corruption, and revise the constitution. In the first year, Fairuz said the society aims for concrete results on the first, which he perceives as the least controversial and the most likely to build trust with the government and the Sunni blocs in the COR. Al Wifaq thus far has not tabled a major economic proposal - its most significant action in this area was to ratify a royal decree increasing unemployment benefits. It has instead used its new position cautiously to lobby for more jobs and housing in Shia areas. Fairuz said Al Wifaq plans only behind-the-scenes work on the more sensitive corruption and constitution issues during this period, but will issue a statement at the end of the term listing them as goals for next year. As Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh

Ali Salman told the press last month, "priority should go to building trust inside the COR and with the government first."

13. (C) One tangible benefit of Al Wifaq's entry into the political system has been the government's willingness to use the society as an intermediary with more hardline Shia. Interior Ministry officials meet with Al Wifaq MPs, allow them to lobby for Shia youths' release from detention, and sometimes enlist their help in quelling riots peacefully, notably following the February arrest and quick release of two of Bahrain's most prominent Shia leaders (Ref. C). Al Wifaq MPs privately describe this position as a double-edged sword, because it causes some Shia to consider them accomplices to an unpopular government, and reduces the time MPs can spend legislating, especially those representing the districts that are most often the sites of clashes with the police.

EARLY SIGNS POSITIVE, BUT CONSTITUTION A BIG CHALLENGE

14. (C) A modest discussion of political reform has started early in the legislative session, thanks largely to the initiative of the Sunni Islamist blocs, Al Asala and Al Minbar. The impetus was the government's failure to act on 25 of 27 laws the COR proposed in its 2002-2006 session. (Note: Under the 2002 Constitution, the parliament can propose legislation for the government to draft, but cannot draft legislation on its own.) Both Sunni blocs complained publicly that the government was not taking the COR seriously, and the next week Al Asala tabled a proposal to

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amend 40 of the 220 bylaws governing the COR's operations to increase government accountability to elected legislators. The most significant proposed change provides for publicly questioning cabinet ministers before the full COR, in contrast with the more common current practice of closed-door discussions before individual COR committees. All four COR blocs (Al Wifaq, Al Minbar, Al Asala, and the non-Islamist, pro-government Al Mustaqbal) are creating an informal committee to discuss these amendments, which Al Wifaq MP Khalil Al Marzooq told EmbOffs would be a testing ground for broader political reform.

15. (C) This cooperation is unlikely to continue if and when Al Wifaq turns its attention to the constitution and government corruption. A possible constitutional change Al Wifaq leaders have cited as an important first step would be elections - direct or indirect - for at least some seats on the Shura Council, the upper legislative house which is appointed by the King and has effective veto power over the COR. Nizar Al Qari, a member of the internal advisory council which governs many of Al Wifaq's activities, told EmbOffs the society also hopes to increase the number of cabinet ministers from outside the ruling family, citing the Jordanian monarchy as a model. Al Wifaq leaders also repeatedly have demanded redrawing electoral districts to reflect more accurately Bahrain's demographics. Al Wifaq members have not focused on near-term plans for vigorous debate on what they call corruption issues - ruling family ownership of much of Bahrain's most valuable land, for example, or the alleged naturalization of thousands of foreigners loyal to the government - but both issues remain crucial to Al Wifaq leaders.

SUNNIS STILL DEPEND ON GOVERNMENT, QUESTION SHIA LOYALTY

16. (C) From the Sunni side, Al Asala and Al Minbar MPs risk alienating their allies and supporters in both the government and the population if they are perceived as siding with the Shia. A recent debate over approving five decrees King Hamad

issued while the COR was in recess illustrates this divide. Al Wifaq argued the King had attempted to bypass the COR by issuing the decrees instead of waiting for the new MPs to take their seats. Firm support from all three of the COR's other blocs effectively mooted this objection, however, and all five decrees are expected to be approved. A single pro-government MP, Latifa Al Qaoud, initially voted against one of the decrees. The next day, a poem in a Sunni-run newspaper called Al Qaoud's vote a "betrayal." Al Wifaq MP Muhammad Al Mizal told us Al Qaoud came under intense criticism from her community and immediate family, which accused her of selling out to the Shia. When the decree came up for a final vote, Al Qaoud sided with the government; Al Mizal predicted that she would not vote with Al Wifaq again.

17. (C) Sunni MPs are quick to point out that even if they agreed with Al Wifaq on revising the constitution or challenging royal family prerogatives, such sweeping reforms would face greater obstacles. Al Asala bloc leader Ghanim Al Buainain told the Ambassador that government supporters in the Shura Council would reject any constitutional reform bill that the COR passed (Ref. B). Isa Abul Fateh, who ran as an independent but subsequently joined Al Asala, said his advice to Al Wifaq is "don't waste your time." Only the King's blessing can secure constitutional reform, he explained, and attempting this futile struggle would cost Al Wifaq time and credibility that it could use on more feasible initiatives to improve the economy, fight corruption, and strengthen the COR.

18. (C) Sunni Islamist MPs remain suspicious that the Shia community's true loyalty is to Iran. Al Buainain suggested Bahraini Shia would one day follow an order from the Iranian Supreme Leader to rebel against their government. Abul Fateh said that whenever Shia politicians want "advice" on a political issue, they conveniently travel to Iran. Though both MPs made clear their willingness to work with Al Wifaq in the COR, their comments illustrate the sectarian mistrust underlying the body's work.

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AL WIFAQ'S OLD ALLY DISENCHANTED

19. (C) Leaders of the Al Waad society, a liberal, non-sectarian group that for years cooperated with Al Wifaq but won no COR seats in last year's election, have criticized Al Wifaq's initial performance on two points. First, Al Waad supports an aggressive approach in the COR with regard to constitutional reform, in spite of the unlikelihood the government would agree to such systemic change. Al Waad President Ibrahim Sharif told EmbOff that entering the COR as an oppositionist was useful only as a platform for raising contentious issues, not to pass legislation. He thought it was a mistake to keep quiet on constitutional issues in hopes of creating a Sunni-Shia-government consensus that, in his view, would never deliver significant results. Al Waad leaders' second complaint is that Al Wifaq has not consulted them on any substantive issues since the elections, despite a pledge among opposition societies they would remain united. Al Waad Central Committee Chairman Abdul Rahman Al Nuaimi earlier this month publicly excoriated Al Wifaq on this point. Al Waad member Abdul Nabi Al Ekri said there has not been such great distance among the four groups who boycotted Bahrain's 2002 elections in years.

COMMENT

110. (C) The pivotal question hanging over the new COR is where the loyalty of Bahraini Shia lie - with Al Wifaq and political participation, or with the more hardline Haq Movement and its calls for street action. For now, the

balance favors Al Wifaq, but this support will not last forever. Abdul Nabi Al Ekri - a critic of Al Wifaq's recent performance, but still a shrewd and longstanding observer of the Shia opposition - told us Al Wifaq already is losing support to Haq, and that Haq could now mobilize crowds rivaling those of its larger counterpart. We consider Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem's views the most important factor in delivering street support for one group or the other. Qassem remains strongly supportive of Al Wifaq and Shia political participation, although he had not been so during the 2002 elections, which Al Wifaq boycotted.

¶11. (C) Al Wifaq needs a victory on some tangible piece of legislation to show its constituents the controversial decision to enter what they consider a flawed political system was a wise one. The society's own members are vague about how much time they have to do this, understanding that a meaningful victory will require greater buy-in from the government, the Shura Council, and the other COR blocs. Ali Salman on 19 March told a press conference, "if the government obstructs Al Wifaq's national priorities in this legislative term, I do not guarantee civil and social peace will continue...The issue will be out of our hands, and those obstacles will be considered a justification to end civil peace."

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